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## POMPEIAN WALL-SCRIBBLINGS <sup>1</sup>

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Time, that mordant destroyer, with a peculiar irony which calls forth our deepest gratitude, has preserved for us one of the most transitory and evanescent remains of ancient life. By the wall inscriptions <sup>2</sup> of Pompeii, mute memorials of generations lying "in the dark backward and abysm of Time," we are enabled to catch glimpses of lovers and libertines, candidates and electors, innkeepers and drunkards, as they lived and dreamed, loved and hated, in the Pompeii of well-nigh two thousand years ago. This wall-literature, which is found in the interior of homes as well as on public buildings, is the work of school children, slaves, soldiers, and idlers. Of miscellaneous character, it includes quotations from poets, doggerel verses, acclamations, insulting and often obscene words, caricatures, catchwords, alphabets, amatory outbursts. Some of these scribblings, which were scratched in the smooth surface of the walls, and hence called by the Italians *graffiti*, were of a religious, while many were of a political, character; but the great majority were purely personal—of so motley a nature, however, as to defy classification.

The great majority of the *graffiti* are in the Latin language; but there are a number in Greek, and a few scribblings, chiefly parts of alphabets and proper names, in Oscan. Among the Greek inscriptions are few complete verses, a single line from Homer, several personal epithets, and oft-recurring alphabets.

Naturally enough, Latin was not spoken purely in Pompeii, being corrupted by the admixture of bad Greek and influenced by the Oscan, traces of which still persist in the Neapolitan dialect. Thus in a *graffito* of the first line of the *Æneid*, written probably by a person having an Oscan accent and not thoroughly familiar with Latin, the

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Classical Conference at Ann Arbor, Mich., March 30, 1905.

<sup>2</sup> The inscriptions which form the basis of this paper are collected in Vol. IV of the *corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*; some of them are treated also in the works on Pompeii by August Mav, particularly *Pompeii: Its Life and Art*, and in Onebeck's *Pompeii*.

*r* is replaced by the *l*, reminding one strongly of "pidgin English":  
*Alma vilumque cano Tlo.*

The Pompeian wall-scribblers, like the modern Neapolitans, seem to have been thoroughly familiar with poetry amatory in character and of the lightest vein. Ovid and Propertius appear to have been most popular; only two or three phrases and broken lines from Virgil are found, and of that author's many verses but a single complete one is quoted. The greatest number of these verses are found in the Basilica, which the better-educated class was accustomed to frequent. On one part of the wall is written *arma virum*, on another *arma virumque cano, Tro.* A line recalling the fifty-sixth verse of Virgil's second eclogue is quoted: *Rusticus est Corydoi* (*Rusticus es Corydon*)—"Corydon, you're a country bumpkin."

The citations from Ovid are mainly from the *Amores* and from the *Ars Amatoria*. Some ingenious person joined and wrote together as one stanza two lines of Ovid's *Amores*, I, viii, 77, and two from Propertius' *El.*, V, v, 47, which show similarity of context. Perhaps this was written by a disappointed lover at the door of his *amata's* house:

Open wide to gifts your doors,  
 But shut for him who but implores;  
 There, happy swain, enjoy the curses,  
 Of those turned out with empty purses.  
 Bid your maid sleep with open eye,  
 Nor let a generous youth slip by;  
 But let her sleep through night and day,  
 If suitors knock who will not pay.

Besides snatches from well-known poets—generally, to be sure, from Virgil and the erotic poets—there are other verses, which remind one but faintly of familiar authors, and there are still others which appear to have been composed by the loungers himself or borrowed from a poetry now unknown. The following tender appeal, made by some ardent suitor to his Daphne or Chloe, shows traces of Ovid or Propertius:

Love indites my halting strain,  
 Cupid beckons me amain.  
 Beshrew me if I could depart  
 Before you pledged me all your heart,  
 Though I a God might reign!

Another inscription is, with the exception of a slight metrical mistake, a very graceful distich, perhaps a paraphrase or imitation of some popular poet:

Bid him the breezes bind who lovers fain would dissever,  
Or, in its ceaseless play, hinder the fountain forever.

An angry lover writes:

Venus shall feel the weight of my dudgeon,  
And her ribs and her head feel the blows of my bludgeon;  
For my poor broken heart  
I shall make her legs smart;  
So hasten, fond lovers, and all take a part.

Very touching in its simplicity and tenderness is the love of two slaves who place themselves under the protection of Pompeian Venus. This *graffito* is found at the entrance to the theater:

Methe, the slave-woman of Minia, who plays in the Atellan forces, loves Chrestus with all her heart, and prays that Pompeian Venus may be propitious to them and that they may ever live in amity.

One scribbler declares, "Love is sweet;" another remarks that no one can be considered a gentleman who has not had at least one love affair. A lover writes: "Victoria, health be to you; and wherever you are, may you sneeze sweetly." Another lavishes his devotion on "Cestilia, queen of the Pompeians, sweet soul." Some one laments, "My heart is overflowing with love." In one spot a lover writes the word "Psyche" in the conventional heart, even yet the true lover's emblem; the heart which encircles the word is formed by the scrolls of the letter.

A very graceful *graffito*, though not metrically perfect, is the address of a lover to his coachman:

Muleteer, if thou didst but feel the fires of love, thou wouldst haste thee more to join thy adored one. Prithee, quicken thy pace. Come, thou hast drunk well; take thy whip and wield it; bring me swiftly to Pompeii where my dear love awaits me.

A curious example of animosity is: "Asellia, rot thee!" Again we find: "Samius to Cornelius, go hang yourself." Someone declares: "Epaphras, you're a bald-head." Again: "Epaphras you're no ball-player." Some Pompeian, perhaps an admirer of Epaphras, drew a line through this unkind remark, but it is still quite legible.

The Basilica and theaters were, of course, the most frequented buildings, and their walls give ample testimony of this fact, as the following from the Basilica attests:

I marvel, Wall, from ruin safe you fare,  
Such filthy scribblings all your ledges bear.

In several hostelrys situated at the entrance to the town, and intended for the accommodation of peasants of the neighborhood when they came to sell their wares, we find, as in an hotel register, a number of names recorded on the walls of the *cubacula*, or bed-chambers. An instance of marital and domestic affection is the address of a lonely wife to her husband and other relatives:

Hirta a Psacas at all times and in all places sends heartiest greetings to Gaills Hostilius Conops, her husband and guide and gentle adviser, and to her sister Diodata and her Celer; and she sends a greeting to her Primigenia too.

The walls of the wine-shops, like street and house walls, bear *graffiti* containing allusions to the tavern-keeper himself and to his customers. The following was found in a tavern under a picture which represented a soldier handing a goblet to the slave of the tavern: *Da fri(gr)dam pusillum*—"Give me a little cold drink." This may be taken as evidence that the more temperate Pompeians, while not teetotalers, nevertheless used water to mix drinks. A very earnest appeal for a soothing draught, found in the Basilica, comes from one thirsty soul: *Suavis vinaria stitit, rogo vos et valde sitit*—"Suavis is thirsty for whole hogsheads; I implore you, he is powerfully thirsty." To this is added: *Calpurnia tibi dicit vale*—"Calpurnia says, much good may it do you." Still another *graffito* presents the request of a jolly toper for a second cup of the famous *setinum*, or Setian wine: *Adde calicem Setinum*.

The most interesting of these tavern inscriptions is one from Edone's wine-shop, the haunt of the late drinkers:

*Edone dicit: assibus hic bibitur; dipundium si dederis, meliora bibes; quartos si dederis, Vina Falerna bibes edone*—"Here for a penny one can get a drink; for a tuppence one can get a better drink; if you pay fourpence, you can have real Falernian."

A guest gives vent to his vexation toward a tavern-keeper who sells watered wine, in this pithy couplet:

*Talia te jallant utinam me(n)dacia,  
Copo tu ve(n)des acuam et bibes ipse merum.*

Such lies your lips do utter.  
Beware them! Landlord mine,  
You sell your patrons water  
Whilst you yourself drink wine.

There is unmistakable evidence that, even as is the case nowadays, the class of persons who were the habitués of these inns and wine-shops was not the most respectable.

The next class of *graffiti* consists of caricatures. Giving rein to fancy, how easy to invent an amusing story in connection with one Peregrinus, who is represented in a wall-drawing with a conspicuously overdeveloped nose! From the laurel crown that adorns his head it may be deduced that he was some prominent citizen. A wag sketched a similar outline and named it Nasso Fadius (properly Naso), undoubtedly intending a pun.

On the outer wall of a house in the so-called street of Mercury was found a caricature or rough sketch scratched on the plaster by some patriotic citizen of Pompeii to commemorate the squabble between the Pompeians and Nuceriaans which Tacitus vividly, though briefly, describes in the *Annals*. One would think it a joint production, as the armed figure descending the steps appears to be the work of a more skilful hand than the other two, which are merest outlines. Abortive figures on the left probably represent one of the victors dragging a prisoner with arms bound up a ladder. From fear that this would not be easily understood, the artist considered it expedient to label his production, like a child who writes quite on a par with the drawing. It may be translated: "Companions, you were conquered by the same victory as the Nuceriaans." From another partisan of the Pompeians we have: "Down with the Nuceriaans!" From the other side, however, this comes: "Hurrah for the Puteolans! Good luck to the Nuceriaans! Death to the Pompeians and Pithecusaans!"

The epithets applied to gladiators show how popular they were with the ladies, which proves conclusively that the admiration lavished by girls of today on our twentieth-century football hero is but a survival after all. Celadus Threx was "the cause of maidens' sighs,"

and also known as a "Lady-killer," while Crescens was "lord of the lasses."

Not very intelligible nor easy of translation are the following lines, which were written to represent the shape and movement of a snake. The verses praise a certain Septumius, who was probably an India-rubber man or contortionist, and who was said to have enchanted the public by his exhibition of snake-charming:

You who have once witnessed the snake-charming of young Septumius, at which he is a master-hand, be you lover of the stage, or an admirer of horses, I pray you ever keep the scales of justice in even balance.

The translation indicates how unskilful and clumsy the author was in expressing his idea.

The houses and streets of Pompeii, once surging with all the busy life of a thriving town, are tenantless, dead. Yet their former occupants, from their dark grave of twenty centuries, transmit to us a message that in freshness is as of yesterday. The careless scribblings of idle moments revive for us, with the minuteness of reality, the men and women of these long-past ages; and thereby is opened to our wondering eyes another page in the great drama of human life.